

THE PARRYING SHIELDS OF SOUTH-EAST AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

When first contacted by Europeans, the aborigines of SE. Australia were in possession of 2 types of shields. One, relatively wide, very thin in section, and light in weight, was used to ward off spears; the other, relatively narrow in plan, deep in section, and heavy in weight, was used to parry blows from clubs.

It is with the second type that this paper is concerned.

Judging by the sporadic occurrence of this kind of shield in many parts of the world we must conclude that it is polygenetic. However, as far as SE. Australia is concerned, it is possible that its immediate prototype was in New Guinea as a shield of this nature has been reported from the Whagi Valley and Kowan, in the Western Highlands (Aufenanger 1957).

If this type of shield was introduced, when or how it reached Australia is a question which cannot be definitely answered at present, but, judging from the recent distribution, there must have been two quite distinct entries. One, at an earlier period, would account for the shields in the SE. of the continent, while the second, probably a later arrival, would account for those found in a small area in the NW. of Western Australia.

However, there is no concrete evidence to show that the southern parrying shields were so introduced, and their typology and distribution seem to indicate that they, in fact, originated in SE. Australia. This view is further strengthened by the fact that the wooden club, against which the parrying shield was a counter, was a prominent feature in the armoury of the aborigines of this part of Australia.

In any case, these shields were clearly a comparatively old item in the native material culture, as is attested by their wide distribution, and by the fact that they existed in at least 3 main types and several sub-varieties.

In this paper an attempt has been made to ascertain the range and distribution of these 3 types. For this purpose the shields in the collections of the Australian and the McLeay Museums in Sydney, the South Australian and the Queensland Museums and the National Museum of Victoria, have been examined.

In preparing a distribution map the tribal boundaries as delineated by Tindale (1940) were used. The distribution of the shields was found to follow almost natural boundaries, both physically, as applying to the configuration of the land, and sociologically, as applying to the tribal contacts and alliances. These boundaries are therefore the likely limits of the distribution of the shield types, and seem to confirm the correctness of the distribution as plotted in Fig. 2.

Evidence from specimens in Museum collections

The provenance of the specimens in collections is correctly known in only a comparatively small number of cases. Mostly registration books simply state: 'Murray River' or 'From New South Wales' or some such incomplete legend. Obviously, specimens so labelled cannot be accepted as evidence. Others are marked with only the name of the town or city where they were purchased. For instance, in the National Museum collection, a number of specimens are labelled 'Warrnambool'. The registration book states that these examples were obtained from the

Warrnambool Museum by exchange. Having no authentic recorded locality, a former curator wrongly labelled them 'Warrnambool'. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, the provenance ascribed to every specimen has had to be closely examined and many beautiful examples have been discarded through lack of evidence of precise locality.

The shields attributed to the Yarra tribe (the *Woewurong*) who formerly occupied the site of Melbourne, present a real problem, as examples of most types are included among them. When the first colonists arrived, the tribes and groups inhabiting the country for a considerable distance from the new settlement gravitated to it. It is recorded that, at one time, groups from the Western District, the Murray and Goulburn R., and from Gippsland, as well as what was left of the Yarra and Coast tribes, were all assembled there. It is obvious that many shields must have been traded to the whites, and these would be referred to indiscriminately as obtained in Melbourne. Because of this unsatisfactory condition the shields attributed to the Yarra tribe and those labelled 'Melbourne' have been ignored in the present study. The *Woewurong*, or Yarra people, were allied to, and obtained their wives from the Goulburn River blacks; the social institutions of the 2 tribes differed very little, and there can be no doubt that their material cultures were analogous. Because of these facts I have assumed that the shields of the Melbourne tribe were identical with those used on the Goulburn R.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

None of the early navigators or voyagers described the shields they saw in possession of the natives. Cook, Baudin, White, and Tench, who were generally reliable and first-class observers, merely stated that the natives around Botany and Broken Bays had 2 types of shields. Collins (1802) was a little more specific, and stated that one of these 2 shields, called *Ta-war-rang* by the natives, had the handle on one side while the 2 other sides were engraved with wavy lines.

The inland explorers, likewise, are of no help in the identification of shield types. Only Mitchell (1839) provides an illustration of a shield, which he calls *Eleeman*; unfortunately, he does not say from where it was obtained, simply referring to it as used by the natives of Australia. Actually, the word *Eleeman* was the Botany Bay name for the spear-shield, though this word was later used by Europeans when referring to shields of either type.

In 1847, Angas published his 'South Australia Illustrated', in which he figured a shield from L. Frome, although he did not give it a name. It is a parrying shield of the *Mulka* type.

Later students of the aborigines did not give much time to the study of shields, the only exceptions being Etheridge (1894 and 1896) and Eylmann (1908). The latter illustrated and described those used by the *Narrynieri* of SE. South Australia.

Brough Smyth (1878) illustrated and described the Victorian types; however, he was a recorder rather than observer, and in the matter of shields was somewhat led astray by his informants. The shields illustrated by him in his 'Aborigines of Victoria' are now in the collections of the National Museum of Victoria.

LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE

As stated, Collins called the parrying shield *Tawarrang*. He was the only one amongst the early navigators, explorers or settlers to give this shield a name. The most reliable authority amongst the later writers was Curr (1886). He compiled comparative lists of common words used by the aborigines from all parts of Australia, and he gave the word *Murka*, *Mulka*, *Mulga*, *Mulgera* and variants of all these,

as denoting 'shield' in a number of languages, stretching from the Dawson, Fitzroy and Isaac R. in Queensland across to the Warrego and Macquarie; thence down the Darling in N.S.W., across the Murray into the Western District of Victoria, and down the Hopkins and Glenelg R. to Portland and Warrnambool. To the W. it extended to Mt Gambier and the Coorong in South Australia, also to the lower Murray and L. Alexandrina, and to the E. along the Murray as far as Echuca and along the coast as far as the Yarra R.

A difficulty in accepting linguistic evidence for the distribution of shield types is the possibility of all variants of the word not meaning the same type of shield. For instance, the Gippsland type is called *Drunmung* by Brough Smyth, but this word does not appear in Curr's lists, the name given by him being *Bamerook*. *Bamerook*, however, according to Bulmer (1878) refers to the spear-shield and not to the parrying-shield of Gippsland. On the other hand, the parrying shield illustrated by Brough Smyth, and called by him *Drunmung*, from the Western District of Victoria, is in reality the Gippsland type, for which I find no evidence of a Western District occurrence. Bulmer states that the parrying shield is called *Murruga* by the natives of Gippsland. I find no evidence of the Western District *Mulka* having been used there.

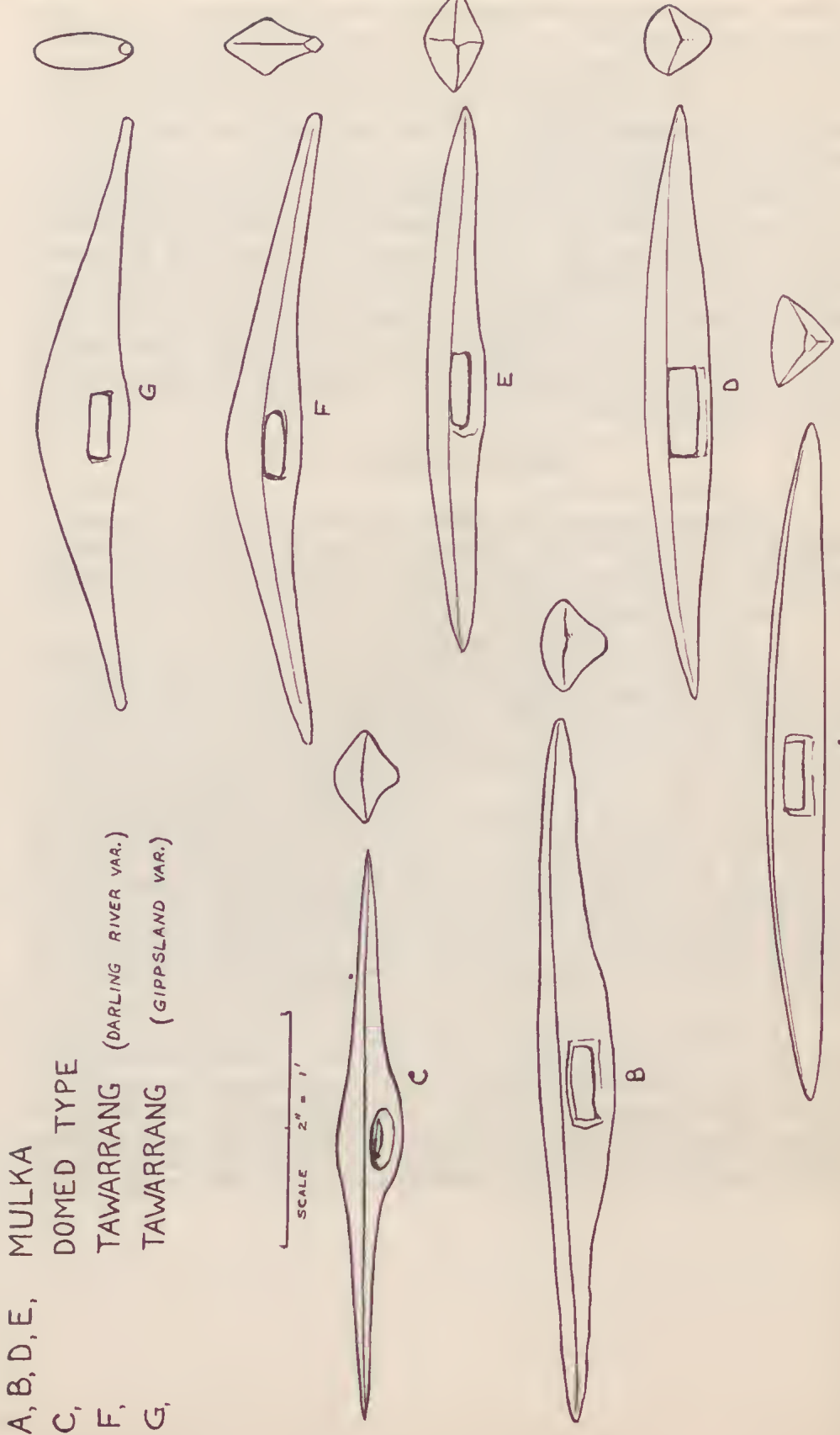
Types and Varieties

3 types are easily recognizable:

(1) The shield, known as the *Mulka* (Fig. 1A) has a distinctly triangular cross section, the 3 faces being flat. The outer face, actually the base of the triangle, is generally ornamented with typical SE. motifs, such as engraved diamonds, chevrons, or wavy lines. The handle is carved from the solid by removing a section of wood from the body of the angle forming the apex of the triangle.

(2) At its extreme SE. limit of distribution, in Central Victoria, the outer face of the shield tends to change, becoming gently convex to rounded (Fig. 1D) or to develop a longitudinal ridge along the centre (Fig. 1E). In its fullest evolution, this ridge causes the shield to become bow-shaped in profile, and quadrangular or diamond-shaped in cross section. This gives rise to the second type, which we must call 'Tawarrang', and not *Drunmung*, as this was the name first used for it by Collins in 1798. The 2 front faces are ornamented, the central ridge being left undecorated as if in readiness to receive blows from clubs; the handle is cut through the 2 back faces. The *Tawarrang* gave rise to 2 varieties, in one (Fig. 1F) the shield became flattened laterally and acquired a central boss though still retaining the side ridges. This type occurred down the Murray from Echuca and up the Darling. The second variety (Fig. 1G) lost the lateral ridges and became oviform in cross section and bowed in profile, thus absorbing the central boss. This type occurred along the Murray R. E. of Echuca, along the Mitchell R. and the Gippsland Lakes, and N. along coastal N.S.W. at least as far N. as the Manning R.

(3) The fullest development of the rounded face is seen in the shields from the N. parts of Central Victoria and along the W. side of the Great Dividing Ra. of N.S.W. In this third or 'domed' type (Fig. 1C.), the triangular cross section is completely lost and except for the handle itself, which projects from the back of the shield, the apex of the triangle is flattened. The front face is convex and has a raised central boss, and in some examples is ornamented with incised designs, whilst in others it bears only the characteristic New South Wales surface 'tooling'.



A, B, D, E, MULKA

C, DOMED TYPE

F, TAWARRANG (DARLING RIVER VAR.)

G, TAWARRANG (GIPPSLAND VAR.)

A FIG. 1

Conclusions

The crudest of these 3 types was the *Mulka*, and it appears to have been the original from which the other 2 evolved. The steps by which this mutation took place are easily followed in the diagram (Fig. 1) which was drawn from specimens in the collection of the National Museum of Victoria.



FIG. 2

By referring to the map (Fig. 2) it becomes evident that in the early days of white occupation the *Mulka* was centred in the Western District of Victoria with sporadic occurrences along the Darling R. The evidence of Language also suggests that, at one time or another, the *Mulka* was used over a stretch of country from the Dawson, Fitzroy and Isaac R. near Rockhampton, over the Dividing Ra. into

Central Queensland, S. across Central and Western N.S.W., across the Murray into the Western District of Victoria, as far W. as L. Alexandrina in South Australia and as far E. as the Yarra R. and Echuca in Victoria.

At a later period, in E. New South Wales W. of the Dividing Ra., the Mulka developed into the shield which, for want of the native name, we may call the 'domed type', referring to the 'domed' outer face of the shield (Fig. 1C). Another development occurred along the Murray R., where the Mulka gave rise to the Tawarrang, of which there are 2 varieties, the quadrangular, centred on the Darling, and the oviform, centred in Gippsland.

The distribution map (Fig. 2) shows that the more highly developed shields were confined to an area in the SE. of the continent, and that the more simple or primitive examples were peripheral to this area. Such a distribution clearly indicates that this item of the aborigines material culture originated and was developed in the SE. and was not introduced from New Guinea or elsewhere.

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